

Real Life *Kantei* of swords #13: Examining an interesting fake

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Introduction

In previous articles of this series ([Coutinho 2010a](#) and [Coutinho 2010b](#)) we commented how difficult it is to *kantei* swords with an unusual *tsukuri komi* or shape. To complete *kantei* of a sword we must first identify when the sword was made, second identify what school the sword belongs to and third identify which sword smith made the sword.

To carry out the *kantei* we generally use the procedure referred to as SPET (Shape, Pattern, Edge and Tang). However if the *tsukuri komi* is unusual we find the first step to be more difficult.

The sword we are going to examine was found in Uruguay South America several years ago and is signed. This gives us a place to begin analysis, but there is no guarantee that the signature is genuine and if the *tsukuri komi* or shape is consistent with the works of that smith?

The *tsukuri komi*- examining the blade shape

The sword to be examined is a *kata-kiri-ha-zukuri tanto*. (See Figure 1)

The Dimensions of the sword are:

Nagasa – 24 cm

Kasane – 6 mm

Motohada – 2.6 cm

Nakago length – 9cm with *kesho yasuri* file marks and a *kengyo kurijiri* butt end



Figure 1a - Picture of the Sword (omote)

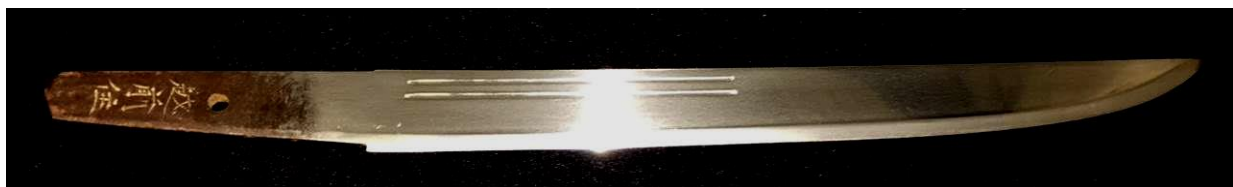


Figure 1b - Picture of the Sword (ura)

The signature is of this Shinto smith and reads:

Omote: Yamato Dai Jo Fujiwara Masa Nori. (See figure 2a)

Ura: Echizen Ju (See Figure 2b)

We considered the *omote* to be the side containing the name of the smith, however, because the sword has an unusual *tsukuri komi* we are not sure if this is correct designation. We shall return to this point later in the paper.



Figure 2a - the signature on the omote.



Figure 2b - the signature on the ura

Workmanship of the sword - examining the pattern and edge

If we consider the *omote* as the side where the name of the smith was inscribed, it is *hira zukuri*. The *jigane* appears hard and bright and is comprised of *itame nagara*. The *hamon* is *suguha* with no visible activity. The *habuchi* is muted where visible and the *boshi* is *suguha* with a point and long turn back (*kaeri*).

The *ura* has a ridge that is very near the ha (cutting edge), but the rest of the *ura* is the same as the *omote*. The *hamon* is not easily visible and appears to end at the cutting edge ridge.

Our overall impression is that the workmanship is poor. The blade *jigane* is hard and featureless. It is possible it was made with imported western low carbon steel. The *hamon* looks like a *hadori* applied by a polisher, but we may be wrong because the blade is in poor polish. Based on our impressions the sword doesn't appear to be legitimate, and may be a *gendai* product.

When we examine the sword against the *hada* of two swords that have passed NBTHK *shinsa*, (figures 3a & 3b) we find that the subject sword *hada* is very different. The *hada* of the two genuine swords shows clear grain patterns of *itame* with *chikei*. Also, their *hamon* is full of activity with a bright *habuchi* and scattered *nie*. The *hada* of the subject sword (figure 3c) lacks distinct grain pattern and appears flat and dense. The *hamon* is lifeless without activity or definition. If you only consider the workmanship, then it is possible to conclude that the subject sword is a fake and *gimei*.

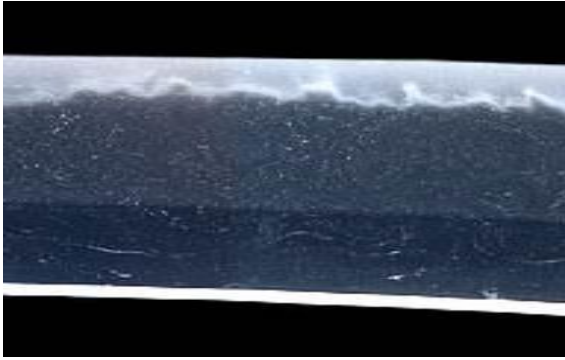


Figure 3a – extract from Sanmei.com gallery

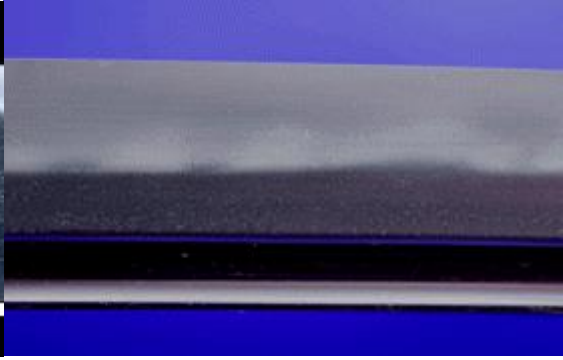


Figure 3b – extract from Uniquejapan.com gallery



Figure 3c – extract from subject sword

When we examine how *kata-kiri-ha-zukuri* swords from *Echizen* were signed, we notice that they signed on the opposite side compared to our sword. To clarify: What we considered the *omote*, where we assumed the signature should be, was actually the *ura*.

If we compare our sword with a similar sword by Yasutsugu (figure 4 below), we immediately notice that the *omote* of our sword was the *hira* side but the Yasutsugu *omote* is the *kiriba* side. We found many swords where the *omote* (where the signature should be) is the *Kiriba* side. One of them is a katana where the *omote* is the *kiriba* side signed by Masanori and the *ura* is the *shinogi zukuri* side. (**Kanzan (1882)-pg293**) We also found other smiths from *Echizen* who produced *kata-kiri-ha-zukuri* swords and they all signed on the *kiriba* side. So it appears that our sword was signed on the wrong side.

Considering the quality of our sword, when compared to the *tanto* shown in Figure 4, (an example of an excellent *tanto* in *kata-kiri-ha-zukuri* style made in *Echizen* by Yasutsugu in the early Shinto era) we find our sword lacking in workmanship. The sword signed *Echizen Ju Shimosaka* is representative of a *kata-kiri-ha-zukuri tanto* made by a high ranking smith. Although our sword has a signature of the highly ranked Shinto smith Masanori, it lacks the workmanship and characteristics of that smith. Therefore, we should conclude from this point of view that our sword is a *shinshinto*, *kindai* or a *gendai* fake (see below on the section where signatures of fakes are examined)



Figure 4- An early Shinto sword that is Kata Kiriba Zukuri (courtesy of Aoi Art). Please note that the signature of the Yasutsugu sword is placed on the Kiriba side of the blade and not in the hira side.

Examination of the nakago

The *nakago* of a sword must be examined independent of the signature. When we compare the subject sword with the *oshigata* we notice the *nakago* of the genuine Masanori tapers and have *kengyo kurijiri butt end with kesho yasuri* file marks. The *nakago* of our sword has the same butt end and filemarks and no taper, which is uncommon in Shinto swords and not found in Echizen swords or authentic Masanori swords. (It looks like a *sotoba nakago*) Another observation is that the color of the *nakago* is very dark. We have access to Echizen swords of the same period and the color is not this dark. We believe that this *nakago* was darkened using some chemical substance. In fact, when the *nagako* is rubbed between your fingers, a dark coloration comes off and a lightly patinated *nagako* surface appears. The *nakago* characteristics of this sword strongly suggest that it is a forgery.

Remark: The so called *yamagatana* of the Kaifu Group in the Awa province produced during Shinto times a great number *kata kiriba zukuri* swords. There were so many produced that for a period of time all *kata kiriba zukuri* swords were referred to as *kaifu zukuri* swords. (Kôzu (1992)-page 366). However examination of the examples presented in (Kôzu (1992)) show that this type of *nakago* was not used. Also the workmanship of Kaifu swords is different than the one we are examining.

Examination of the signature for authenticity (Shin Mei)

In examining the signature of our sword we find multiple smiths with this name. In the book by Shimizu (Shimizu (1988)) on page 523 (top row) we find two smiths (first and second generation) that lived in *Echizen* and signed in the same manner as the sword being studied.

There are also several other Masanori listed, two on page 522 and 14 on page 523, but they didn't live in *Echizen* and didn't use the *Yamato Dai Jo* title.

The first generation is considered superior (*Yu*) and the second generation is considered excellent (*Shu*). Apparently the first generation has at least one sword designated *Juyo Token*. Below (Figure 5a and 5b) are two examples of the signatures of the first generation and one of the second smiths. It should be noted here that in the book by Shimizu (**Shimizu (1988)**) the *shodai* is said to have made most of his work in *Genwa* (1615) and the *nidai* on *Kanbun*(1661). However in other references the *shodai* is said to have done most of his work on *Keicho* (1596) and the *nidai* on *Kanbun*. The *oshigata* below shows as dates for the *shodai* as both *Genwa* (top *oshigata*) and *Keicho* (bottom *oshigata*).

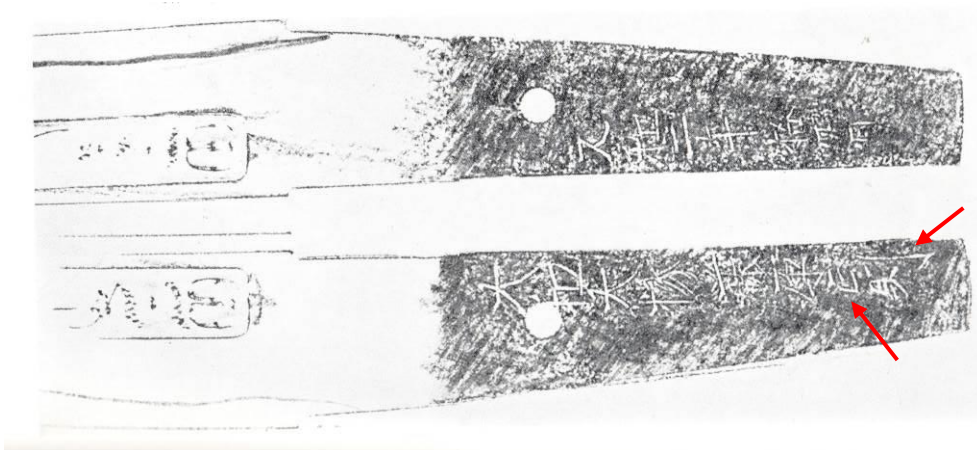


Figure 5a- Examples of the signature of the first generation (Kanzan Token Koza)

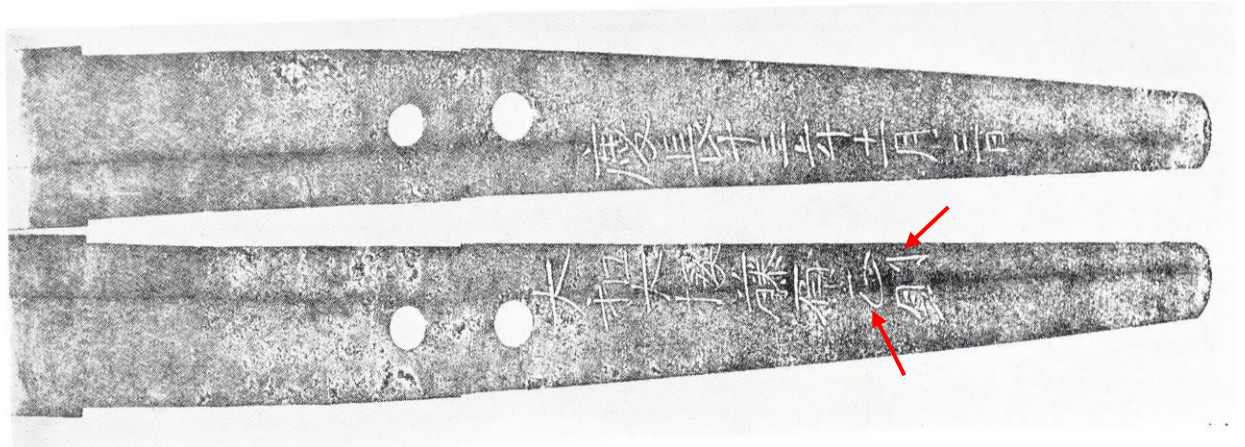


Figure 5b- Examples of the signature of the second generation (Sesko (2015))

The signature of our sword and the above *oshigata* has a couple of characters that mismatch. However, there are differences between the two genuine signatures shown above. Look for instance the *kanji Masa* and the *kanji Nori* marked by arrows. Another thing to note is our subject sword is signed with a thick chisel and the *kanji* in the *oshigata* appear to be done with a thin chisel. According to Hôzu Hako and Satô Kan'Ichio (**Kôzu (1992)** page 249) the *Shodai Masanori* always inscribed his signature with a rather fine *tagane* whereas the *nidai* signed with a fairly thick *tagane* (which is not the case of the *oshigata* of the *nidai* show in figure 4b)

There is another strange discrepancy that may be very important. At this point we follow the method explained in the book by Hiroi and Iida (**Y. Hiroi and K. Iida (1983)**). Consider the *oshigata* in figure 4a. The date on the top *oshigata* is *Genwa* second year and attributed to the *shodai*. Note the *kanji Masa*. It has the back of the *Masa* *kanji* almost vertical. Also the last *kanji Nori* has a very long right most stroke. Now consider the second *oshigata* that is dated *Keicho* 13. The top *kanji* has its back rounded (just like our subject sword) but the left most stroke of the *kanji* for *Nori* is not long and different from the subject sword but very similar to the *kanji* of the top *oshigata* show in figure 3a. This is very puzzling: Apparently our sword has one *kanji* similar to a sword dated *Keicho* and the other similar to a sword dated *Genwa*. Does this show that the sword signature is a forgery? Not quite: On page 572 of the book *To Ko Tai Kan* by Tokuno Kazuo (**Tokuno (1971)**) there is a signature where both *kanji* are similar to our forgery. Please note that the signature in this *oshigata* was cut with a thicker chisel. So based only on the examination of these two *kanji* we got confused to say the least, but did not give up.

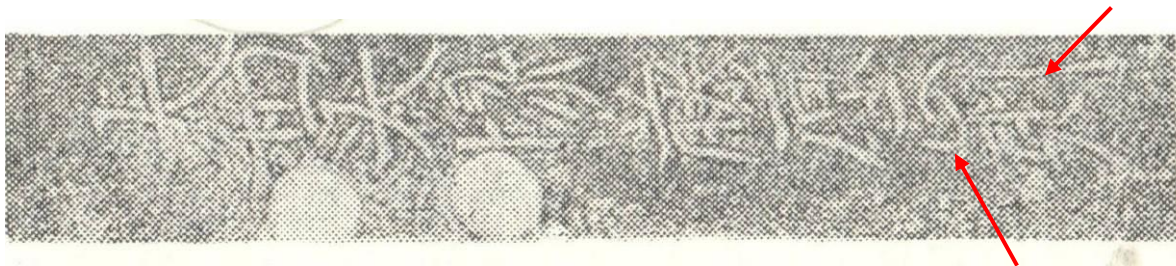


Figure 4c- *Oshigata* from Tokuno (1971)

Remark: The time difference between *Keicho* and *Kanbun* is 65 years. We wonder if there was a third generation and if the second generation shown above is really a third generation. However, we recognize that only further studies by Japanese scholars can determine if this hypothesis is possible or not.

Examining the forgery a bit more closely

Generally this would conclude the examination of the sword by a *Shinsa* board in Japan. The sword would be declared *gimei* and the process finished. However if the sword is of some quality the signature might be removed (see (**Bottomley (2015)** for comments on this) and reattributed to another smith, however, we would like to do further research on the subject sword and ascertain:

- 1) Why it was made in an unusual *tsukuri komi*, and when was this style made?
- 2) When was it made and who added the signature?
- 3) Does the swords *koshirae* tell us anything about the sword?

First, this style of *tsukuri komi* was used in very old swords from the *Kamakura era*, at the beginning of the *Shinto* era, and in revival pieces from the *Shinshinto* era. This sword is not very old so we can definitely assume that it was made no earlier than the *Shinto* or during the *Shinshinto* era, but it could also be a *gendai* sword.

Let's examine if the forger signed the right type of sword. According to Hôzu Hako and Satô Kan'ichio (**Kôzu (1992)** page 236), swords made in *Echizen* are either from the ***shimosaka kei*** or from the ***mino kei***. Among the swords made by the ***shimosaka kei***, to which Masanori belonged, *kata kiriba zukuri katana* are occasionally seen but there are frequent *kata kiriba zukuri tanto*. So we conclude that the forger knew about Masanori swords, and this excludes the possibility of this sword being a *shiire-mei* forgery (see below).

Now let's try to see if we can find out who signed the sword. In fact by examining the signature of the subject sword it may be possible, but very difficult, to determine who signed it. Forgeries are classified (see below) and we hope at least to see if we can identify what type of forgery this is. Let's exclude the poor quality of the sword and assume it may be an early *shinto gimei*. What other smiths signed with the name Masanori in Shinto era? The other smiths listed in Shimizu (**Shimizu (1988)**) are eleven which are considered common (*Hei*), one which is considered middle (*Chu*) and another considered average (*Ryo*). None of these smiths are considered as good as the signature on the subject sword. Unfortunately we have no examples of these smiths' signatures to compare the common characters. In any case why would any of these smiths try to imitate a better smith by making such an unusual *tsukuri komi*? This seems to us to be very unlikely. So we will abandon the hypothesis that the fake was done by another smith with the same name living in the early Shinto period.

It should be noted here that *Yamato Dai Jo Fuji Wara Masa Nori* although considered *Yu* in **Shimizu (1988)** was only *Yoki-Wazamono* in the Yamada Asaemon classification. It is common that the classification by the cutting ability do not match the modern classifications.

In the case of the subject sword the signature of Echizen Masanori seems to be very similar to the genuine examples. (Note however that two *kanji* are similar to signatures made on different eras as explained before). So we will tentatively assume that the signature was done by an expert in faking signatures. To explore this idea we will summarize how the fake signatures are studied and classified by three different experts.

The first reference is a book by Hiroi Yushi and Iida Kazuo (**Y. Hiroi and K.Iida (1983)**) that was translated by Harry Watson. The second reference is an article by Tanobe Michihiro published in the Magazine *Me No Me* (**Tanobe (2009)**) and translated by Dr. S. Alexander Takeuchi. The third reference is contained in the book *Nihonto Koza Volume 5 -Shin Shinto*, translated by Harry Watson (**S. Ikeda (1992)**)

According to **Tanobe (2009)** *gimei* blades can be divided in two major categories: *jidai - nise* (old fakes) and *kindai - nise* (modern era fakes). The *jidai-nise* signatures are usually not good because the forgers back them (except for a few like Kajihei that we will study below) could not study the *mei* or signatures properly.

According to Ikeda (**S. Ikeda (1992)**), the fakes can be classified as *jidai gimei*, *kindai gimei* (from around 1935) and *gendai gimei* (from around 1948 on)

Let's first consider that the fake is a *jidai-nise*. According to Tanobe Michihiro (**Tanobe 2009**) those fakes "were produced in the eras where the original smiths were still alive or by the end of the Edo period. Even though this type of counterfeits usually have stable patina on the *nakago* they are easy to spot " because the forgers back then could not study the *mei* they wanted to fake, due to a lack of reliable visual authentic *mei*. However, there were some exceptions, the most famous being *Kajihei* who was a student of *Taikei Naotane* and had access to many original works by famous smiths. There is another type of forgery done in the late Edo period. This forgery is called *shiire-mei*. According to Tanobe Michihiro the forger would bulk purchase swords made by mediocre smiths and carve signatures of famous smiths on them. These *gimei* signatures are, according to Tanobe Michihiro, very poor and sometimes *gimei* of non-existent smiths. On page 45 of the article by Tanobe (**Tanobe (2009)**) (page 17 of the translation) the name of the "well know" *Yamato Daijo Masanori* is mixed with the also famous *Harima Dai Jo Shigetaka* to create a non-existent *Yamato Dai Jo Shigetaka*.

How do we confirm if our *mei* is the work of Kajihei?

According to Tanobe (2009) the characteristics of Kajihei signatures are

- 1) The ending points of his horizontal *tagane* lines are (called *atari*) are over emphasized and too long. This signature has this. For example look at the first kanji.
- 2) The ending points of his diagonal *tagane* lines from upper to lower right look overly swollen and heavy. This signature has it. Look for example at the line of the third kanji (*dai*)
- 3) When examining Kajihei 's vertical *tagane* lines, they taper off suddenly towards the end (i.e. lacking "*nebari*" [or stick likeness]), and thus the ending sections look too pointy like needles. This feature may be seen in the left hand part of the kanji *jo* (the fourth *kanji*) and in the *kanji wara*. These features can be clearly seen in page 401 of the book by Ikeda Suematsu (**S. Ikeda (1992)**)

We are not completely convinced that this is a Kajihei signature. However, we do not think it is representative of a *shiire-mei* either. Therefore to exclude the possibility that it is a *Kajihei* forgery we looked for more clues in the book by Ikeda Suematsu (**Ikeda (1984)**) which contains about 200 pages with three to four *oshigata* by Kajihei and also examples of *oshigata* of *kindai* and *gendai* forgeries

We could not find in (**Ikeda (1984)**) a Kajihei signature of Masanori. It is important to point out that the Kajihei used both thin and thick chisels. However, we found on page

62 of this reference two kanji **ECHI ZEN** that are similar to the Kanji on the "ura" of our subject sword. The evidence we found is insufficient to say if this is a Kajihei *oshigata*. Therefore we hypothesize it is a *kindai* or *gendai* forgery made between the beginning of the Meiji Era and the beginning of the Showa Era.

Examining the koshirae

This sword came with a *koshirae*. The *koshirae* is a combination of over cleaned poor quality *shakudo mino goto* style *fuchi kashira* with flower designs (Chrysanthemums) and a mismatched *shakudo kozuka* which we assume was added by the seller. The *saya* has green *maki* with crushed abalone shell background, overlaid with gold stencils of Chinese or *namban* designs. On top of this is applied a thick and coarsely applied layer of clear lacquer. The use of what appear to be stenciled or applied designs and the thick overlay of clear lacquer lead one to believe that this *koshirae* was modified from its original state. It is possible that the original *koshirae* was a solid green *maki* with crushed abalone shell and *mino goto* style *fuchi kashira*. The gold designs and thick lacquer may have been added later to "tart-up" the *koshirae* and make it more appealing to foreigners. We believe the age of the *koshirae* seems consistent with the age of the blade, which would be early Meiji to beginning of the Showa era.



Figure 5 – koshirae

Conclusion

We conclude the subject sword is a forgery. This is interesting because the *sugata* of our sword is unusual, but one that was produced by the famous swordsmith Masanori. However, when we examine the sword carefully we note:

- 1) Although the *sugata* (*kiriba zukuri*) is one which Masanori produced in *tanto* and *wakizashi*, the workmanship (*hada* and *hamon*) are not consistent with the quality or style of Yamato Dai Jo Masanori
- 2) The shape and color of the *nakago* is wrong.
- 3) The signature was put in the wrong place.
- 4) The signature is a good imitation of the signature of Masanori and it is interesting to note that apparently the signature of Masanori changed along his life. The signature of the subject sword appears to be a mix of a signature made in the Keicho era and the Genwa era and is somewhat consistent with the signature found in Tokuno (**Tokuno (1971)**)
- 5) Since the signature appears to us to be a good imitation we tried to find a Kajihei *oshigata* of it. We could not find a definitive example and therefore considered this possibility unlikely.
- 7) The *koshirae* is of Meiji composition or a *gendai* reproduction and therefore consistent with the estimated age of the blade.

Although we consider the sword to be a fake with a *gimei* signature, we consider this fake interesting not only because it is done in an unusual shape but because the signature appeared well carved and genuine which made it more difficult to declare *gimei*. (Perhaps due to our inexperience)

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